

THE MYSTERIOUS RANCHE; OR, A Scout with Kit Carson.

BY LEON LEWIS.

AUTHOR OF "THE BROWN LEADER," "RED KNIFE," "THE BOY MAGician," ETC., ETC.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE.—In a former narrative, "Red Knive, or the Brown Leader," I had the honor of presenting, from strictly authentic sources, a series of Colonel Carson's exploits and adventures, which occurred in 1851. In the present record, I have gone back to some of the great scout's earlier experiences, namely, to a series of events in which he figured prominently during the summer of 1848, and the following winter.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOUT AND THE SAVAGE. The afternoon was fine—the Great Plain in full verdure. And Kit Carson, in the midst of this beautiful solitude, was as happy as the birds around him.

He was riding eastward, on the Santa Fe route, just east of Fort Larned, in Kansas. At length he drew rein.

He had reached an affluent of the Arkansas river, and found himself in the edge of a considerable growth of timber by which the banks of this affluent were lined. Looking through the openings in the verdure before him, he saw, half a mile away, to the eastward, a single horseman approaching at an easy pace.

"Who?" he ejaculated. "That fellow must be a red-skin—more or less red-skin, anyhow. And yet he has a white woman on the horse before him. What is still more singular, that white woman seems to be sleeping. What can this mean?"

Continuing to advance, the strange horseman was soon near enough to be seen with considerable distinctness by the watcher.

"There's a minkery here," muttered Kit, under his breath, his eyes lighting up sternly. "That woman isn't taking this ride into the red-skin country of her own free will."

In a minute more the stranger reached the creek, in which he proceeded to water his horse, an Indian pony.

"I know him now," said Kit to himself. "It is that infernal Fleet Foot, the half-breed."

The savage thus designated was one of the most villainous-looking fellows the scout had ever encountered.

His long, tangled hair, his hideous features, his wretched garb, his dirty complexion, his black, bloodshot eyes, all gave him a most repulsive aspect. His arms—for he carried a hunting-knife, a revolver, and a rifle in plain sight—gave to his ugly exterior a ferocity that was actually startling.

The recognition of the savage having been thus completed, Kit turned his glances upon the object the savage was holding upon the pony in front of him.

The object, as Kit had said, was a white woman, or rather a white girl. Her long, fair hair was disheveled, flying wildly about her shoulders and half hiding her face, but it could be seen that her features were deathly pale, and scratched and bleeding in places, as if she had been struggling terribly with her captor. That she was a captive Kit instantly knew by the fact that her hands were tied behind her, and he next saw that she was not sleeping, as he had at first supposed—nor dead, as he had for an instant feared—but that she was in a death-like swoon!

Ignorant of the gaze bent upon him, the half-breed, whose arm still encircled the slight figure, pushed away the disheveled hair from the pallid features, that he might look upon them.

For a moment he seemed fascinated with the view of the pale, fair countenance, so rarely beautiful, even in its death-like rigidity, and then he bent his head and kissed the half-parted lips, not once merely, but again and again!

"This tires me out," said Kit to himself. "I must change my position a little—just enough to get the girl's head out of line—and then—"

At this instant, and just as the scout began moving into the desired range, the half-breed happened to look beyond the face of his captive to the ground, when his eyes encountered the tracks left by Kit's horse.

In another instant he had detected Carson's presence.

"It's you, eh, Mr. Fleet Foot?" called the scout.

The savage was silent.

"I see it is you," added the scout. "Who is that with you?"

"My new squaw," was the answer.

"Hold on a minute, Mr. Fleet Foot," said the scout.

"What more?" was the response.

"I know that this young lady is not going willingly to the country of Fleet Foot," continued the scout, with calm energy. "I know that she has been stolen, and it is in vain for Fleet Foot to say that she is his squaw."

"Well, what then?" was all the savage deigned to answer.

"The case is just this," continued Carson. "You will have to deliver the girl up to me, that I may take her back to her people."

"I will never do," rejoined the half-breed, bluntly. "This girl is nothing to you, nor have you any claim upon me. Why should we quarrel? I am as much a white man as a red-skin, and the young lady might have a worse fate than to become my wife, even if she becomes my wife unwillingly. There is no possible call for you to interfere with me. The course for you to take, Mr. Carson, is to go your own way and mind your own business, and leave me to mine."

As he ceased speaking he uttered a wild cry of command to his pony, which instantly bounded away to the southward at full gallop.

The scout raised his rifle.

The figure of the man was now fully uncovered, presenting a fair mark, but Kit was compelled to realize, in view of the bounding motions of the pony, that he could not fire upon the desperate villain without the greatest risk of killing the captive.

"The accursed trash!" he ejaculated, his long-repressed wrath breaking forth. "Were it not for sacrificing the girl— But I can at least pursue him!"

He struck his horse sharply with his heels, and the animal bounded away at the top of his speed.

It was a long time before the chase thus begun showed which horse could make the best time. The pony was carrying the most weight, but he was much fresher than the scout's, and that the one circumstance for a time counterbalanced the other. At length, however, the increased weight told upon the pony. The scout commenced gaining.

"I shall catch him," muttered Kit, again speaking under his breath. "How can I save the girl from his desperation?"

At this moment a wild cry of dismay burst from the fugitive.

Just before him, not ten rods distant, he had marked a deep and abrupt depression in

the plain, the bed of one of those creeks so numerous in that region.

As quick as lightning, the hunted miscreant had comprehended that he could not cross this creek at that furious pace, the depression being too wide for a flying leap. He had also comprehended that he could not stop the pony's wild pace in season to avoid it.

The scout saw all this too, and smiled grimly as he realized that a tumble was inevitable.

It was in vain that the half-breed, reduced to one hand, pulled upon the reins, saving and jerking the pony's mouth. The animal would neither turn nor stop, and in another instant had hurled himself into the abrupt abyss, actually turning a somersault in the air, and sending Fleet Foot and the girl flying through space to the opposite slope of the creek.

At that same moment, as it seemed, the scout threw his horse back upon his haunches at the very edge of the creek, and slipped from his saddle, revolver in hand.

"I have you now, Fleet Foot!" he shouted, leaping towards the prostrate savage.

But, as terrible as had been the shock, as quick as had been the scout's movements, the half-breed had gathered himself up from the dust in which he had been rolled; had sought and found his unconscious captive; had drawn his huge hunting-knife and revolver; had placed himself in a double posture of assault and defense beside the motionless figure, and thus, at the instant of Kit's advance, he found that the desperate ruffian was still active, still deadly, still undaunted.

"Not a step nearer!" was the half-breed's defiant cry, while his face glowed like a furnace. "I am still master of the life of this girl, and even of yours. At a touch, at a breath even, I will fire upon you with one hand, while I plunge this knife into the girl's heart with the other! I've said it, and I swear it!"

Riveted to the spot he had gained, the scout stood erect, not ten feet distant from the revolver directed at him—not ten feet from the knife uplifted above the bosom of the captive—and there he remained motionless, not daring to stir, nor even to breathe, lest the half-breed should fulfil his terrible menace.

"It was the first and last time," said Kit, in narrating these things afterwards, "that I was ever freed on the ground!"

And there the two men stood, thus motionless and silent, thus glaring at each other, with that helpless girl between them!

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CHAPTER II.

A DAUGHTER OF THE PLAINS. The strange scene which had arisen between the scout and the savage had a singular termination.

As Kit, revolver in hand, faced Fleet Foot—but without daring to advance a single step, lest the unscrupulous wretch should kill the unfortunate girl—he was suddenly startled to see that the girl's eyes had opened widely, brightly, and consciously upon him.

Before he could utter, however—before he could even fully realize that the captive was conscious and observant—she had passed from under the uplifted hand and murderous knife of the half-breed, and was descending to the bottom of the creek!

At the same instant a wild appeal for help burst from her—

"Save me! save me!"

The swift gleams of lightning do not move quicker than Kit responded to that cry.

At a single bound he was upon the half-breed, whom he stretched senseless and bleeding with a furious blow upon the head from his revolver.

Thus stricken prostrate and helpless, the miscreant was instantly bound.

"Thank Heaven!" then murmured a voice that was singularly musical, despite its intonation of excitement.

Kit sprang to the maiden and cut her bonds.

Never was seen a fairer, brighter, or sweeter picture of womanhood than that she presented.

She was scarcely sixteen, and was even small for her age; but her lithe, lovely figure possessed remarkable strength and agility, and its rare qualities were further enhanced by a soul of the most glorious type.

"You have saved my life, Mr. Carson," she immediately added, grasping his hand—"saved me from a fate worse than a thousand deaths!"

"I thank you from the depths of my soul, and shall remain your grateful debtor forever!"

Thoughts of the dreadful fate from which he had saved her—thoughts of the misery that would be spared to her loved ones by her preservation—caused the slight figure to sway and tremble, for a moment, like a reed in the blast, and Kit felt tears of joyous gratitude falling upon the hand she had so feelingly impressed.

"You are not seriously injured?" he asked.

"No, sir. Only a little scared—a little tumbled!"

"You're a brave girl, I see," said the scout, with a heartiness she showed that he was not a foe, but a friend.

"You ought to have remembered your name," said the scout, with a friendly smile.

"Oh! everybody knows you, Mr. Carson," was the rejoinder. "But with me the case is different. I am too small to be remembered. I must tell you, therefore, that I am Effie Lyon."

"Not Colonel Lyon's daughter? Colonel Lyon of New Mexico?"

"Yes, sir. I am Colonel Lyon's daughter!"

"What! the very girl who has been at school for a year past in Leavenworth?"

"At this assurance the countenance of the scout fairly beamed upon Miss Lyon. He again took her hand with a fatherly tenderness.

"You'll excuse me, Effie," he said. "I ought to have remembered you at sight. My excuse is that I am always a wanderer—always on the wing; and that a succession of new faces is every day presented to me. There is another excuse, too, Effie, in your case; it has been some time since I saw you."

The small face became wreathed with a look of contentment.

"And now, to explain matters," continued Kit, glancing at the half-breed's prostrate figure, and perceiving that he was still unconscious. "Tell me your story first."

"It is not a long one," began Effie. "As you seem to be aware, I have been attending school in Leavenworth. It was agreed that father should come for me at vacation—"

"Let me tell you why he didn't," interrupted the scout. "He was nearly killed, about the twentieth of June, in an encounter with the redskins, and for ten days lay between life and death."

"Father! nearly killed?" faltered Effie, more disturbed by this news than she had been by her late terrible peril. "And I knew nothing of it!"

"But he's out of danger now," resumed Kit. "And will soon be himself again."

"But why didn't Edgar come for me, father?"

being unable to do so?" asked Effie, opening her eyes wide in wonder.

"Edgar?" rejoined Kit. "Who is Edgar?"

"He's a young gentleman who has been visiting in our family once in a while for a year or two past. I mean Edgar Coleman."

"Well, as you are an only child, Effie, I dare say that you are the particular member of your family who is responsible for the visits of this young gentleman."

"I need not deny it," responded Effie, as a rosy flush swept over her pure cheeks; "but as father did not come, and as I did not hear from him, I became anxious about him. I feared that he might have fallen into the hands of the Indians. Every day added to this fear, and at last I determined to set out for home without waiting longer for an explanation of his non-arrival."

"And you did so?"

"Yes, sir. I joined a wagon train that was just starting for Santa Fe, and we came on safely and pleasantly enough until noon to-day, when, passing a brief halt at a crossing, when everybody was busy, and while I was gathering flowers along the wooded banks of the creek, this fiendish savage pounced upon me, stifled my cries, bore me to his pony, mounted with me in his arms, and got off unseen by wading up the creek, and keeping to the cover of the bushes on its banks."

"The villain!" ejaculated Kit. "He must have been watching his opportunity!"

"He was. It turns out that he saw me in Leavenworth, before the train started, and that he has been hovering about it ever since, watching for a chance to seize me. He told me so himself."

"Do you know who and what he is?"

"Only so far as I have seen with my own eyes—that he is a half-breed, and a terrible villain."

"I can tell you something about him. He is called Fleet Foot, and his reputation is well worthy of his name. I do not pretend to keep the run of many of his species; in fact, I have trouble to tell one red-skin from another, so far as the generality of them is concerned; but this fellow has changed to be brought to my notice occasionally for several years, and I have never heard of him anything but evil. As he never follows any business, it's likely that he gets his living—by taking it wherever he can find it."

"He's a thorough demon," affirmed Effie. "He talked love to you, I suppose?"

"Yes; and at last, to save himself trouble, he tried to bind my hands behind me, and then came such a desperate struggle that I at length fainted. This must have been an hour since, or just before you saw me!"

"He has scratched and bruised your face, I see."

"Well, he got about as much as he gave me," said the little heroine coolly.

"You have torn your saquin and dress, I see, in several places, and soiled them."

"And lost my hat altogether. But I can tie a handkerchief over my head, and the rest does not matter."

"Well, Effie, you can travel, anyhow!" exclaimed the scout admiringly. "I'm glad to see you take your awkward adventure so coolly. But tell me where it was that you began to recover your senses—to know where you were?"

"It was just before the red-skin undertook to run away from you. I hope you didn't think I was unconscious all that time. I knew a thing or two, you may be sure. I must have groaned some in coming to, but the red-skin was too busy with you to notice it. At last, when I realized all that was going on, and recognized you—that was when you and he were talking so earnestly—I knew enough to feign unconsciousness and watch for a chance of deliverance. When we tumbled into the creek, I fell upon the red-skin, as good luck would have it, and didn't get so much of a shock as I expected. And this is the whole story."

"I'm glad you fared no worse," commented Kit. "And now for our prisoner. I never kill a red-skin in that helpless condition, unless the guiltiness of blood is fresh upon him. It is our duty, however, to extract the reptile's fangs—in other words, disarm him!"

He suited the action to the word, adding—

"I will carry away his weapons, of course, a mile or two, and then hide them in some place where he will not be likely to find them."

"Then you will give him his liberty? It would not do, I suppose, to leave him where he is?"

"No, Effie. Some of his four-legged relatives—the wolves—would come and eat him before morning."

"His pony has vanished."

"Yes. He is doubtless miles away by this time."

"Then the redskin will have to continue his journey on foot?"

Kit untied his hands, but tied his feet, and left him, Effie remarking—

"In that way we shall get a good start of him."

"That's the idea," rejoined Kit.

Then the couple resumed their journey. The scout was well acquainted with a honest ranchman named Woodbury, who lived on the Arkansas, about ten miles from the scene of this adventure, and they started for it. Conversing pleasantly by the way, the couple rode forward at a fair pace, Effie knowing no fear by reason of the scout's presence, and Kit knowing none by reason of his matchless ability and experience.

The sun was just setting when the couple, after a long and weary ride, came in sight of the ranche they were seeking.

"There it is," said the scout, indicating a dark object on the distant horizon.

The travellers had now arrived near enough to the ranche to see its outlines distinctly, and accordingly fixed their attention upon it.

"The door is closed," observed Kit, as the couple rode nearer. "And so are the windows. But the proprietor is as brave as the bravest, as you may know by the fact of his living here. I dare say he has seen us approaching."

As they advanced still nearer to the lonely ranche, they noticed that a strange air of desolation pervaded the premises. Not a sign of life was visible, and the little garden inclosing the house had been given up to weeds.

"This is odd!" muttered Kit. "Mr. Woodbury had a very beautiful garden when I was here last summer. But I now see no stock, no signs of occupancy whatever."

"He may have moved away," suggested Effie, "and a different sort of man may now have possession of the place."

"That's so; or the red-skins may have killed him," returned Kit, over whose face had come a sudden shadow. "I'm not pleased with the looks of the thing, anyhow! The house itself has gone to the dogs since I was here. It's rather late to retreat, however," he added, looking up at the sky, out of which the light of day was fading, with the abruptness peculiar to the plains. "Now that we are here, we may as well make a call. In ten minutes it will be dark, and we'll do well to prompt in our observations and inquiries."

By this time the travellers were within a few rods of the stone wall protecting the door-

way of the ranche, and here Kit drew rein, looking sharply about him.

"The place looks more and more deserted," he said to Effie, in a low tone. "I do not see so much as a dog. Just sit where you are, Effie, while I step to the door."

CHAPTER III.

THE RANCHE—A SURPRISE. Dismounting, the scout made his way cautiously to the entrance of the house, and then, seeing no one, into the dwelling itself, finding the door unfastened.

In the course of a minute he returned to his young companion.

"There is no one here," he announced. "Perhaps the late conduct of the redskins, of which we were speaking, has frightened Mr. Woodbury away?"

Kit shook his head.

"Mr. Woodbury has not been here lately," he asserted. "There hasn't been a stroke of work done on the place this summer."

"He may have gone away last fall, then, and not have returned."

The scout again shook his head.

"I fear your former suggestion is the true one," he remarked.

"Namely, that the Indians have killed him?"

"Yes. The door is full of bullets, and the turf walls are burnt and smoked in places as if the redskins had fired into them at short range. I fear Mr. Woodbury has been killed!"

"Has the house been ravaged?"

"No. Everything appears as Mr. Woodbury would have naturally left it; only in a disordered state. The furniture is here, such as it was, the dishes, the household stuff of every description, but everything is dirty, damaged, and going to pieces. I'll tell you just what I think, which is that somebody has killed Mr. Woodbury, and that this somebody has taken possession!"

"Is there any sign of that somebody having been here lately?"

"Yes. I cannot say how lately, but I should say within a day or two, although the hearth is perfectly cold. There is a pile of water in the pantry, part of a ham, a bag of corn, a bag of flour, a dish of salt, and various other articles of food. There is a bed of skins in each room, which look as if lately occupied."

"This is very singular," commented Effie. "Mr. Woodbury must have a strange successor in the law extending to the water edge, with a stone wall along the whole front. The house is surrounded with large shade trees, and the garden and grounds are laid out in a tasteful manner, with many rare and beautiful trees, and the entrance to the mansion is laid with a beautiful tessellated pavement."

No. 2. Is a large lot of ground on Pearl street, opposite No. 1, having a front of about 100 feet, and in depth about 110 feet on Talbot street. On this lot is the owner's cottage, stable, and carriage house, but houses, and is well stocked with fine fruit trees, including pear, plum, and fig. Also, grape vines of the usual varieties.

No. 3. Also a large lot at the southwest corner of Pearl and Talbot streets, having a front of 375 feet on Pearl street by 210 feet on Talbot street, bounded by heirs of Dr. Cortlandt Van Rensselaer.

The above premises are about two squares from the steamboat landing and railroad station, and the same from St. Mary's Hall, one of the best female seminaries in the United States, under the charge of Bishop Odenheimer, who resides on the Green Bank, and being only one hour's ride from Philadelphia and three from New York, and almost hourly, make this a most desirable residence.

Sale to commence at 3 1/2 o'clock P. M., on the arrival of the cars from Philadelphia, Terms, one-half cash, balance on notes payable in one or two years. \$200 to be paid down on No. 1, and \$100 on No. 2 and 3, when sold.

THANKLIN WOOLMAN, Agent, 428 3rd St., PHILADELPHIA, No. 70 HIGH STREET, BIRMINGHAM, New Jersey, April 22, 1870.

They made a fire, and had a coarse, but comfortable meal.

"Such a supper, with our hunger, is better than a feast without appetite," remarked Effie.

"I don't know why we shouldn't put up at this hotel until morning," observed Kit, as he also looked contentedly about him. "True, the landlord is absent, but we can get along without him."

"I think the only question is as to whether we can get along with him, if he should chance to return during the night."

"I'll answer for that contingency. On the whole, I think we do well to stay here until morning. There's a room for each of us, and plenty of buffalo robes to make us comfortable."

As he spoke he laid some more wood upon the fire, to light up the interior of the ranche, and a bright body of flames almost instantly illuminated the scene around him as perfectly as it could have been illuminated by the sun at midday.

"Look at that!" suddenly cried Effie, in a startled whisper, as she leaped to her feet.

"What is that?" demanded the scout.

"That writing, in red letters, upon the wall behind us!" exclaimed Miss Lyon, the blood receding from her face, while her form shook violently.

She pointed to the wall opposite the fireplace—the wall upon which those ruddy flames alone so vividly—and there the scout beheld several lines of coarse and irregular writing, evidently the work of a human finger, which had again and again been dipped in blood.

This terrible revelation was as follows:—"I am attacked, this 10th of March, by Fleet Foot and a dozen others. Already terribly wounded. Expect to go under, as the door can't hold out much longer."

"JOHN WOODBURY."

It was a message from the dead!

The mystery of poor Woodbury's fate stood terribly revealed.

In his last moments, mortally wounded, he had written with his finger, and with his own blood, that fearful message.

Before the scout and his companion could withdraw their gaze from that dreadful revelation, they were further startled by sounds that came to their hearing from without the ranche.

Their eyes met.

"I hear footsteps!" murmured Effie.

"And voices also!" replied Carson.

At the same instant a dog was heard snuffing at the entrance of the ranche. Then the dog began barking furiously, while the sound of hurried footsteps arose in front of the door!

The scout and his companion were startled. Their minds were so full of the terrible fate which had overtaken the former occupant of the ranche, poor Mr. Woodbury, as revealed by that strange writing on the wall, that they could think of nothing but redskins.

The approaching footsteps became louder.

"Who can they be?" whispered Effie. "Indians?"

"We shall soon see," was Kit's answer. The above is all of this story that will be published in our columns. The continuation of it from where it leaves off here can be found only in the New York Ledger, which is for sale at all the bookstores and news depots. Ask for the number dated May 7, 1870, and in it you will find the continuation of this beautiful tale. The Ledger is mailed to subscribers at three dollars a year. The Ledger has the best stories of any paper in the world; and Henry Ward Beecher, James Partor, and Fanny Fern have articles in every number.

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